

Conversion of the Gentiles

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[0 : 00] And also, I just want to thank you guys for just fighting through those distractions and continuing to sing and worshipping the Lord. It was such a beautiful thing for me to see from the back and to hear from the back.

Nobody stopped singing. We just kept worshipping the Lord because God is here and He's all we need, and I'm just so, I was so encouraged to see that. So thank you guys for worshipping, singing songs of praise to God through that.

Please turn with me to Acts chapter 15. Acts chapter 15, verses 22 to 35.

We originally intended to cover verses 1 to 35 together because it's really one passage with a single main point, but because it got so long, there's so many materials, so many things in it to cover, I divided it into half, and so it's kind of an unusual place to be to have preached this second half of this section by itself.

I'm going to try to bring in the main passage from the first part because that's really where the main point of the passage is. But please bear with me as we go through this. Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's Word.

[1 : 16] Heavenly Father, there are many things in this world, in our lives, that seek to control us, that seek to master us. But Lord, we are your people.

So we come once again this Sunday to worship you and to be governed by your Word. We submit ourselves to the authority of your Word.

We incline the ears of our hearts to you. Speak to us now. Teach us. And fill us with wonder again at your wonderful mercy and your amazing grace that has reconciled Jews and Gentiles, that have made a way so that we might be cleansed, that our hearts might be cleansed by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Fill us with renewed joy at that wonderful reality today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Acts 15, verses 22 to 35.

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders with the whole church to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter.

[2 : 48] The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others also.

[4 : 15] This is God's holy and authoritative word. There are many people in the world that wonder whether or not they can ever be a Christian. You know, can I become a Christian if I'm Pakistani with a Muslim background?

What if I'm Indian with a Hindu background? What if I'm Chinese with a Buddhist background?

That's the kind of question that Acts 15 has in mind.

Remember that Jews had a 2,000-year head start in their knowledge of Yehovah, the Lord God, the one God, compared to the Gentiles. But Jesus came as the Christ, the King, the Messianic King, and He died on the cross for our sins.

And by His death, He broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. It's a passage that Bailey shared from today in the prophecy. And as a result of that, all of those who put their faith in Jesus, regardless of their ethnic background, cultural background, racial background, can be included and joined together as God's one people.

But this new inclusion naturally raised some questions for Gentiles. Do I need to become a Jew in order to be a Christian? Should I dress like Jews?

[5 : 37] Do I need to learn Aramaic? Do I need to observe the Mosaic laws of ritual purity? Should I get circumcised like Jews? Now, we could extrapolate and try to apply that to our context and think about what kind of questions people might ask nowadays.

Maybe they'll say, well, do I need to renounce my culture entirely in order to be a Christian? Or do I need to behave like a Westerner, dress like a Westerner? Do I need to learn English?

Do I need to use certain hymnals or liturgical handbooks? We could come up with a thousand questions like this, but the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15 unanimously decided that Gentiles, people of all non-Jewish backgrounds and cultures, may be saved by repenting of their sins and putting their faith in Jesus as Gentiles.

They are not to be troubled with extra hindrances and burdens. They don't need to keep the law of Moses and be circumcised in order to be saved. Verses 9 to 11, Peter spoke forcefully that Gentiles, like the Jews, will have their hearts cleansed by faith in Jesus Christ and that they will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And James concluded in verse 19, therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God. So that's the main point of this whole passage. All those who turn from their sins and trust in Jesus, regardless of their background, may be saved, will be saved.

[7 : 11] However, curiously, after saying that, right after saying that, right after saying we should not trouble the Gentiles, James proceeds to stipulate four other requirements that Gentiles need to follow.

He says in verses 20 to 21, we should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood. For from ancient generations, Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

So that raises these questions. How does this not trouble the Gentiles? Aren't these requirements troublesome for them? Didn't they just say that Gentiles do not need to observe the law of Moses? What then are these requirements which are based on the Mosaic law? So we'll answer those questions in two parts. First, we're going to talk about the requirements for Gentile converts in verses 22 to 29.

And then we'll talk about the rejoicing of the Gentile converts in verses 30 to 35. It seems that after arriving at their final decision, the apostles and the elders, along with the whole church, decided to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

[8 : 23] And verse 23 tells us that the delegation that they chose included Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, who were leading men among the brothers. Among the brothers, meaning that they're not among the apostles, they're not among the elders, they're among the brothers, they're lay people.

However, they are leading men, which means even though they don't hold any office in the church, any formal authority in the church, they are influential brothers. They are called prophets later in verse 32.

So the apostles and the elders choose Judas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to the church in Syrian Antioch because they need some representatives from the Jerusalem church to verify the content of the letter.

Because, I mean, Paul and Barnabas could just forge something and say, hey, this is what the Jerusalem elders said. And so they send a delegation, a representative of their own church to go with Paul and Barnabas to the Syrian Antioch church.

But the church in Antioch, if you look carefully, is not the only intended recipient of this letter. The letter is addressed to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.

[9 : 33] So this letter is what we call an encyclical. It's a letter that is intended for general circulation among all the churches with Gentile populations.

This is confirmed by Acts 16, verse 4, where it says that Paul, Silas, and Timothy, quote, as they went on their way through the cities, delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

So basically, wherever they go, they're letting the churches know this is what the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem decided. In verse 24, the apostles and the elders provide the occasion for the letter, why they have to write it in the first place.

Quote, since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions. These are the men mentioned in verse 1 who had come down from the Jerusalem church and were teaching the Gentile brothers that they cannot be saved unless they are circumcised and keep the laws of Moses like the Jews.

We're learning here that they were actually not authorized to teach in this way by the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem. In other words, they were rogue preachers who had no business teaching the church in Antioch.

[10 : 45] By transgressing their bounds, they sowed trouble for the Gentiles, the Gentile believers. They sowed words of trouble, it says, which is contrasted with later Paul and Barnabas and Silas and Judas' words that were upbuilding and encouraging and strengthening.

And so this letter written by the apostles intended to set them straight, set the record straight. And then they commend Barnabas and Paul as beloved brothers or risk their lives for the Lord so that people are inclined to listen to them instead of the rogue preachers that had gone out from them. And then, in verses 28 to 29, they outline the stipulations that they had agreed on in verses 19 to 21. Before we delve into the significance of these four requirements, it's important for us to note that this is an authoritative decree from the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem.

The phrase, it has seemed good to us, which is used in verses 22, 25, and 28, makes it sound like the apostles and the elders are just kind of not that sure of the matter.

It sounds like a less than authoritative kind of a personal opinion on the matter. It seems good to me to do this. But that's not what that phrase means. The phrase, it seemed good to us, is an idiomatic way of expressing an official decision in Greek.

[12 : 04] Greek. So, for example, over 3,000 Greek inscriptions have been found by archaeologists that contain this phrase. And most of them occur in formulas like this, decision of the council and the people, indicating an official decision of the rulers of the city.

So this is why the Christian Standard Bible, which is another good translation like the ESV, translates verse 25 this way. It says, we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly beloved Barnabas and Paul.

The CSB also translates verse 28 this way, for it was the Holy Spirit's decision and ours not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements.

So this is an official and authoritative decision reached by the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church in obedience to the will of the Holy Spirit to be enforced in all the churches with Gentile believers.

These are not mere helpful suggestions. So then, what is going on here? Didn't James conclude in verse 19, we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God?

[13 : 13] What then are these four additional stipulations? Verse 28 says, for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.

First, it's most important to note that these are not requirements for salvation. Remember what I said last week in my sermon on Acts 15, 1-21.

Some of the Jewish Christians who had a Pharisaical background were insisting that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep all the laws of Moses in order to be saved. But the apostles and the elders decided that these Gentiles who had repented and believed in Jesus, who had gotten baptized and

had received the Holy Spirit, are already saved.

They said in verse 9 that God has already cleansed their hearts by faith. And in verse 11 they said, we are all, Jews and Gentiles alike, are saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus. So God has abolished the ceremonial distinction between clean Jews and unclean Gentiles.

He makes no such distinction anymore. And He Himself has given ultimate proof of this by giving the Gentiles the Holy Spirit in response to their faith in Jesus.

[14:26] So the question of salvation has already been settled. We know this because even though repentance, faith, and baptism are the conditions for receiving God's saving grace, as it says in Acts 2.38, the Jerusalem Council's decree does not include the exhortation to repent and believe and be baptized.

baptized. That's because they're speaking to Gentile believers who have already done that. They're saved. However, this does not mean that Gentiles could continue to live in their pagan lifestyles. They don't need to become Jewish, but they do need to live as Christians. So the four requirements stipulated by the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church pertain to matters of Christian obedience that are particularly relevant for Gentile converts.

That's why verse 29 says, if you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. The language keep yourselves implies ongoing obedience, and do well is not a language of salvation, but a language of obedience.

These are commands that these Gentile Christians must carefully observe continually, not in order to become Christians, but because they are Christians. But why these four specific stipulations?

[15:52] And are these requirements still binding on us today? Those are the questions that I have to answer. There's a lot of debate among pastors and Bible scholars on these questions, and I will briefly mention a few of the most plausible options before I tell you what I think is going on here.

Some people say that these four requirements are taken from the laws of Noah, which predate the laws of Moses, and therefore they are binding even when the law of Moses has been fulfilled, because these laws apply not only to Jews but to all of humanity.

That's what they say. The problem with this interpretation is that the concept of the laws of Noah is foreign to Scripture. It's only found in extra-biblical Jewish rabbinical sources.

And in Genesis 9, verses 46, God does command Noah after the flood not to eat animal flesh with its life, that is, its blood. However, in that passage where the laws of Noah are repeatedly taken from, there is no mention of abstaining from what has been sacrificed to idols or of sexual immorality.

And the laws of Noah found in Jewish rabbinical writings include seven stipulations, not four, including the prohibition of blasphemy, murder, stealing, and perversion of justice.

[17:10] So the parallels are not very compelling. Some other people say that these four requirements are taken from Leviticus 16, 29 to 18, 30, which specifically outlines how Gentiles who are sojourning among the Jews must, how they should behave in order to function with Jews without offending them and following their customs.

So the Leviticus passage prohibits offering sacrifices at an altar other than the one inside the tabernacle, which would have barred people from eating meat sacrificed to idols. It also prohibits incest and prohibits eating meat from animals that have been strangled and it prohibits eating blood.

So there's a lot of similarities. However, once again, the parallels don't fit exactly or as neatly as we would like because the Leviticus passage also includes the command for Gentiles to observe the Sabbath, which is not included in the stipulations in Acts 15.

And the term sexual immorality used in Acts 15 is much broader than just incest, which is the only thing that Leviticus passage is concerned with. And that passage doesn't tell us specifically not to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

It only says that you have to offer the sacrifice in the right place at the entrance of the tent of meeting. So even though that passage could have been on the apostles and the elders on the back of their minds, that passage does not seem to be the immediate reason for these four stipulations.

[18:36] The most popular explanation of these stipulations is that these are not actual requirements, that these are not binding for Gentile Christians for all time, but that these are temporary recommendations for how Gentile Christians should conduct themselves among Jewish Christians, lest they offend their Jewish sensibilities.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul argues that even though he doesn't think there is anything wrong with consuming meat that had been sacrificed to idols and are sold in the marketplace, he says he would never eat it if doing so would cause a fellow Christian who has a weaker conscience than he does to stumble.

So applying that logic to this passage, they argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating what has been sacrificed to idols or eating strangled animals or eating blood, but that you should abstain from them for the sake of the consciences of your Jewish Christian brothers and sisters. In other words, that these are not actual requirements, but accommodations of Jewish Christians and their sensibilities, and therefore only relevant where there is a church made up of believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

That is an appealing solution, but I think it has some insurmountable exegetical problems. First, there is no indication in the passage that these stipulations are temporary accommodations of Jewish sensibilities.

[20 : 01] The council's decree does not say that anywhere in the text that Gentiles should follow these guidelines only when they are in fellowship with Jewish converts. Rather, the driving question behind the Jerusalem council is, what does it mean for a Gentile to be Christian?

Remember, this is a new problem. Until recently, all Christians were Jewish. But now that Gentiles are coming to faith in Jesus, what is required of them? How are they to live?

Is there anything that is unacceptable due to their Gentile lifestyle specifically? And so verse 28 says, for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.

They're not adding anything beyond these burdens, but they are stipulating these four burdens as something that Gentiles must do. There's no contextual or time limit placed on these requirements at which point they would expire.

Second, these stipulations are called requirements in verse 28. They're not wise or helpful suggestions. The Greek word translated requirements refers to necessities, things that are essential in connection to something.

[21 : 12] If the apostles and the elders were merely telling the Gentile Christians to abide by these rules, even though they don't need to, because there's actually nothing wrong with doing these things, just to be sensitive toward their Jewish brothers and sisters, then they give no indication of that rationale, that concern in the text.

Third, the four requirements do not pertain merely to things that would offend Jewish sensibilities. They are not just ceremonial requirements pertaining to ritual purity. They are not merely cultural or things, but they are ethical concerns.

because eating meat sacrificed to idols, eating blood of animals that have been strangled, which means their blood has not been let out, and sexual immorality are not enjoined upon these Gentiles because they offend the Jews, but because they are offensive to God.

This is not merely about Gentile believers respecting their Jewish brothers and sisters, because one clear example of that is sexual immorality. Sexual immorality is not something that is otherwise permissible, but in this case forbidden because they don't want to offend Jews.

It's forbidden everywhere at all times because it offends God, not merely because it offends prudish Jews. So for these reasons, I am convinced that these four requirements are actual requirements.

[22 : 34] They're binding on all Gentile converts everywhere. Obviously, these four requirements are not all that is commanded of Gentile Christians after their conversion. The apostles and the elders of Jerusalem are not saying to these Gentile believers that, well, as long as you keep these four things, you can do everything you want and live however you wish.

That's not what they're saying. They, like every other Christian, are expected to obey all of God's word. The fact that Christ has fulfilled the law does not mean that the law ceases to be the word of God.

Even though some aspects of the law have been made obsolete by Christ's one sacrifice for all, all of God's word is still profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

As it says in 2 Timothy 3, 16-17. The word of God teaches us of God's character and about God's will. And so it is important for us to heed them and obey them.

The reason why the apostles and the elders are singling these four things out is that they were particularly rampant issues among the Gentile population.

[23 : 51] For Gentiles who were enmeshed in their pagan culture and largely ignorant of God's word, it was important to point out these things because those things were considered acceptable to them in their upbringing.

So even in our setting, right, this is the case. When we tell Christian, what we tell Christian converts who grew up in Christian homes with godly Christian parents is not exactly the same as it always with what we tell brand new converts from unbelieving backgrounds who have no idea what God's word teaches.

So just to give you an example, we have had in the past a person come to our church and they would come, this person would come regularly, a couple people, they would come regularly and they would say that, well, I believe in Jesus now, I want to be baptized.

But then as I started talking to them or interviewing them for baptism and for membership, I find out that they're actually cohabiting with somebody and having sexual relations with this person even though they're not married.

Right? And so I had to tell them, well, if you're going to be a follower of Christ, you need to stop doing that, renounce that and living in a different way because that's what it means to be a Christian, to obey Christ and to follow Christ.

[25 : 10] Now, you don't need to necessarily have those conversations always with people who are raised in Christian homes because they already know that that's the case. I mean, nowadays, maybe you can't assume that, but that's generally the case.

So what's going on here is the reason why they don't spell these things out for the Jews is because all faithful Jews already keep these commands. But the Gentiles who are being converted have no idea that these things are not okay because that's what they're doing all the time.

And so the apostles and the elders are singling these things out and saying, you need to stay away from these. Abstain from these. So now let's look at what exactly these four requirements are.

First, they are to abstain from things polluted by idols. It says in verse 20, this command is explained more specifically in verse 29. It says abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols.

Because pagan temples offered animals as sacrifices to the gods, they also often functioned as banqueting halls and butcher shops. So some of the meat would be consumed on the premises at the pagan temples by the worshipers and then some of the meat that's left over would be taken to the marketplace to be sold for profit to the general public.

[26 : 26] So I believe what's being forbidden here in particular is in the first category, meats that are offered as sacrifice to idols and consumed on the premises. Don't eat meat sacrificed to idols.

And the reason why I think that is based on 1 Corinthians 8-10. That's where Paul gives very detailed guidance on what to do with all such food. And his instructions are consistent with what we find here in Acts 15.

In that context, Paul is writing to Corinthian believers who are resisting Paul's previous injunction not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Some of the Corinthians were resisting Paul's command saying things like this, well, but we possess knowledge that these idols have no real existence since there is no God but one.

Idols are just figments of our imagination. So then why can't we just go through with the festivities and enjoy some delicious, freshly cooked meat with a clear conscience? That's what the Corinthians were saying to Paul.

In response, first, Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 8 that even if they themselves have a clear conscience about what they're doing, they should abstain from eating food sacrificed to idols because they might cause other Christians who do not think it's okay to partake in such pagan sacrifices to stumble.

[27 : 44] This is an argument based on safeguarding other Christians' conscience. Paul is saying even if you're right, what you're doing is wrong because it's unloving to your Christian brothers and sisters with more sensitive consciences.

And then in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul offers up himself as an example of someone who has given up his rights and entitlements for the sake of others. This is the truer Christian way to give up even what we think we are entitled to out of love for others.

Now, after saying that in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul makes another argument against eating meat sacrificed to idols. And there he distinguishes participating in the pagan sacrifices and eating the polluted meat there on the premises.

He contrasts that with buying meat that had been sacrificed to idols but it sold in the marketplace in the eating that afterwards. So he gives two different prescriptions for those two scenarios.

He argues that participating in the pagan sacrifices and eating tainted meat in that temple in the premises is never allowed under any circumstance because even though the idols themselves are nothing, demons, evil spirits are present and involved in such sacrifices.

[28 : 59] This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, 19-21. What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is nothing, anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. So a Gentile convert may not participate in this ubiquitous Gentile practice of eating food sacrificed to idols because to do so is to consort with demons themselves.

Paul does say, however, that as long as you don't participate in the pagan sacrifices themselves, Christians can eat any meat purchased from the marketplace without raising questions of origin and questions of conscience.

So he's adopting basically a don't ask, don't tell policy. So if you get a meat from the marketplace, don't ask them where they got it. Just eat it. You're not participating in an idol sacrifice.

You're not consorting with demons. It's just good meat. Eat it. That's okay. However, he says, if someone tells you as they're serving you that meat, I got this from the marketplace, but it was actually sacrificed to an idol before, then Paul says, don't eat it for the sake of guarding the conscience of that Christian brother.

[30 : 21] So now, it's kind of a complex argument. I think you guys are following me. You guys are doing really great. I'm sorry, this is getting pretty detailed here. I've been thinking about this passage for a long time.

And so, that's the flow of Paul's argument. So, you may never participate in the pagan sacrifice. You may never eat such meat sacrificed to idols. You may eat the meat you get from the marketplace, but if someone knows they was from the pagan temple, don't eat it if they tell you that. Right? So, it's actually very consistent with what the apostles and the elders are saying in Acts 15. Abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols.

So, in certain European, Asian, Oceanian, and African cultures, ancestor worship and the veneration of the dead is commonly practiced even today. Sometimes, they set up tables full of all kinds of foods as a way of feeding their ancestors.

[31 : 22] Sometimes, in hopes that they will watch over them or grant them some kind of favor. These kinds of practices are often passed off as expressions of filial piety, but we need to remember that demons are involved in such pagan sacrifices.

Christians would be wise to abstain from that. I don't have very many memories of my childhood in South Korea. I have a bad memory. But I do remember this very issue becoming a point of contention between my parents and their siblings because every year they would have this sacrifice to our deceased ancestors and they would have food set up in the huge table with all the food set up and every relative would take turns coming to the table and prostrating themselves in front of it. And my parents, after their conversion to Christianity, refused to do it. And because of that, they were criticized and scolded by their family members. I think it's fair to apply this command to other contexts of pagan worship as well.

Don't participate in the worship of other gods. Even if you are fully convinced that Allah or Brahma or Buddha are no gods at all, you must remember that demons are involved in their worship and in their sacrifice.

Second, Gentile converts are to abstain from blood. And third, from what has been strangled. These two prohibitions are related because an animal that has been strangled has not had its blood let out.

[33 : 04] And it's the presence of blood that makes the consumption of strangled animals forbidden. Pliny, who was a first century Roman natural historian and a contemporary of the apostles, notes that consuming the blood of animals and humans, in fact, was considered medicinal around this time.

He recounts that epileptic patients would rush into the stadium to consume the blood of freshly slain gladiators. However, early Christians roundly condemned such practices.

Early Christians were at times, this is kind of funny in some ways to think about, not funny for them, but early Christians were at times falsely accused of ritual cannibalism. You could kind of imagine why they would be accused of such a thing because we participate in the Lord's Supper and we talk about eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood, right?

So, I mean, that's, it's kind of maybe understandable that such misunderstanding would come about. But second century Christian apologist Tertullian refutes that false accusation and then he points out in turn the hypocrisy of their accusers.

He denounces the pagan worship of Bellona, a Roman goddess of war whose rights involved drinking blood. He also condemns the practice of some Gentiles who would rush into the Colosseum to consume the gurgling blood of the gladiators like Pliny mentioned.

[34 : 25] And he contrasts their practices with the Christians here. He says this, Blush for your vile ways before the Christians who have not even the blood of animals at their meals of simple and natural food who abstain from things strangled and that die a natural death for no other reason than that they may not contract pollution so much as from blood secreted in the viscera.

To clench the matter with a single example, you tempt Christians with sausages of blood just because you are perfectly aware that the thing by which you thus try to get them to transgress they hold unlawful.

And how unreasonable it is to believe that those of whom you are convinced that they regard with horror the idea of tasting the blood of oxen are eager after blood of men. So his argument is you're accusing Christians of eating people and drinking human blood when these guys won't even eat the blood sausage that you give them because you know that they don't eat it and you're tempting them intentionally.

So these are examples of how early Christians were behaving at the time. Third century church historian Eusebius notes that when a Christian woman named Biblius was being tortured for her faith and her torturers slandered Christians by saying, well you Christians cannibalize children she refuted their slander by saying this how would such men eat children when they are not allowed to eat the blood even of rational animals.

There was also an ecumenical council of churches in Trullo in the 7th century 692 AD which was attended by 215 Christian bishops from the Eastern Roman Empire and that council confirmed the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council decree saying this I think I have the quote for you guys the divine scripture commands us to abstain from blood from things strangled and from fornication.

[36 : 13] Those therefore who on account of a dainty stomach prepare by any art for food the blood of any animal and so eat it we punish suitably. If anyone henceforth be punished to eat in any way the blood of an animal if he be a clergyman let him be deposed if a layman let him be cut off.

This was an ecumenical council of all the churches in the area coming together to say this maybe the punishment was a little bit severe but it shows that this was the widespread practice of Christians to not consume blood strangled animals and other things.

This was the consistent view of the church fathers. Nowadays most Christians are totally concerned about consuming blood and I have to admit until two weeks ago and I started studying this passage in depth for preparation for this sermon I too thought that it was permissible for Christians to eat blood.

The reason why many people think that is because of Mark 7 18-23 where Jesus says this Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him since it enters not his heart but his stomach and is expelled?

Thus he declared all foods clean and he said what comes out of a person is what defiles him for from within out of the heart of man come evil thoughts sexual immorality theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

[37 : 40] All these evil things come from within and they defile a person. So from this most Christians assume that everything that is served as food is fair game.

However what I fail to note in my former view is that the command not to eat blood in the Old Testament is never given in the context of instructions regarding clean and unclean foods. Instead it is always given in the context of instructions regarding offerings and sacrifices made to God. The command not to eat blood has its origin in Genesis 9-4 where God first permits humankind to eat animals for food and he says but you shall not eat flesh with its life that is its blood.

It's reiterated in Leviticus 17 10-12 where the rationale given is this if anyone of the house of Israel or of the sojourner or the strangers who sojourn among them eat any blood I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people for the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

Deuteronomy 12 23-24 also says this only be sure that you do not eat the blood for the blood is the life and you shall not eat the life with the flesh you shall not eat it you shall pour it out on the earth like water.

[39 : 09] The command not to eat blood was never based on the need to distinguish between holy Jews and common Gentiles between clean and unclean foods it was always based on the sacredness of blood itself because God had given blood not for food but for making atonement and for our souls.

This principle doesn't change in the New Testament. Hebrews 9-22 says this indeed under the law almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Blood signifies life. It is out of respect for life and more importantly out of respect for the giver of life we abstain from consuming blood.

not because blood is a ceremoniously defiling food but because God has appointed blood to be the means of atonement not food.

Jesus didn't permit the eating of blood when he declared all foods clean because blood was never considered food in the first place in scripture. Now I say this with I sound very confident as I'm saying this but I want you to know that I'm teaching this with some tentativeness because the view that these stipulations are binding on Christians today is a minority view and most faithful and wise pastors nowadays that I know especially from our own tradition the reformed tradition disagree with me.

[40 : 41] So I want you guys to know that. So I want you want to invite you to test what I'm saying test my teaching to make sure that it really is what the scripture says. my preaching is authoritative only in so far as it is consistent with scripture.

It's God's word that's infallible my interpretation of the word is not it's never infallible. But I do want you to know that I'm not some you know rogue pastor that relishes having contrarian views.

It makes me deeply uncomfortable and insecure when I find myself in disagreement with a majority of pastors in modern times. I wrestled with these issues long time spent countless scores of hours mulling it over and lost sleep over it and I wouldn't have the confidence even to share with you these views that I have of it apart from the universal agreement of church fathers for about the first 1500 years of church history.

The Orthodox Church for example still teaches that eating blood is forbidden and that they've been doing this since the earliest days of the church. Even among Reformed theologians I found a kinder spirit in John Bunyan the author of Pilgrim's Progress and he writes this and though this law was abolished by the coming of Christ yet we find the apostles in their council at Jerusalem forbid the eating of things strangled and commanded the Christians to abstain from blood and though we are not now obliged to keep the law of Moses yet I cannot find upon what grounds many Christians take liberty to act contrary to the obedience of the apostles of Christ in eating blood and things strangled. In other words these four requirements are not merely part of the Mosaic law they were commands given by the Holy Spirit and by the apostles after Jesus' resurrection and ascension after Pentecost to New Covenant believers.

[42 : 43] So if my interpretation of this passage is correct that means we too must abstain from eating blood blood sausage blood pudding blood pudding I think it's called pig's blood cake blood tofu blood soup blood pancake and so on.

Now some of you might be panicking because of your fondness for rare steak but steak connoisseurs assure me that the red liquid that comes out when you cook steak is not actually blood but a protein called myoglobin do you guys know that?

You guys laughing because you knew that already? So it gives the red hue to the water that's coming out of the steak it's apparently not blood I felt so much better after I learned that because I've eaten a lot of medium rare steak but we have to admit even if the red sauce the juice coming out of the steak is blood it should not be hard for us to give up mere food for the sake of obeying God in refraining from eating blood we communicate to those around us our regard for the life that

only God can create and only God can take away in refraining from eating blood we communicate our reverence for the fact that God has given blood as the means of making atonement for our sins and as we do that we are testifying to the blood that Jesus shed on the cross fourth this is the fourth the last stipulation the Gentile believers are to abstain from sexual immorality which includes fornication prostitution adultery incest homosexuality bestiality and all the other forms of sexual relations that are outside of God's design of marriage between one man and one woman once again sexual immorality was rampant among the Gentiles in the first century as they are today in a book entitled premarital sex in America sociologists

Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker estimate that 84% of unmarried Americans between the ages of 18 and 23 have already had sex this is a very common sin I know there are those of you who have struggled with this I've shared this from my own testimony in my life there's grace for you if you've sinned in this way God forgives but sexual immorality is an egregious sin because Christians are members of the body of Christ we are one with Christ we are a temple of the Holy Spirit but by indulging in sexual immorality we sin against our own bodies and as we do that we sin against the one spirit of which we are a part such unholy mingling should never happen in order for Gentiles who are reared in a promiscuous and licentious culture to be faithful Christians they must renounce their former way of life and pledge allegiance to the way of Jesus the apostles and the elders determined that it is not too onerous to expect abidance to these commands because as it says in verse 21 for from ancient generations

Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues in other words these are ethical standards that are well known everywhere in the world because of the presence of the Jews everywhere in the world and because of their faithful proclamation of the Mosaic law so it's not too hard to expect abiding to these four requirements so those are the requirements for Gentile converts that was my first point my second point is a lot shorter let's look at the rejoicing of the Gentile converts in response to this verdict after the delegation delivers the letter it says in verse 31 and when they had read it they rejoiced because of its encouragement notice that none of the Gentile believers are balking at these four requirements saying well you mean I have to give up one of my main sources of fresh delicious meat you mean I can't have any more blood sausages are you kidding me you mean

[47 : 21] I can't sleep around anymore nobody's saying that they are more than willing to make these changes because these are infinitesimally small sacrifices compared to what they have gained in Jesus Christ remember from verse 19 the apostles decided not to trouble these Gentiles so they don't see these requirements as troubling them these are not troublesome to them why?

because by repenting of their sinful ways and turning to the way of Jesus these Gentiles have gained eternal life they have gained heaven they have gained fellowship with the triune God himself think of it this way many entrepreneurs you know empty out their bank accounts we have some entrepreneurs ourselves talk to Brian and Jenny or Caleb others they will literally empty out their bank account sometimes to sell off most of their possessions in order to come up with the necessary funds to keep their business going why in the world would anybody do that?

that sounds crazy doesn't it? because they believe that they can make up for all that they have spent and make much more money on top of that with their business because they believe that what they're giving up does not compare to what they stand to gain eternity heaven how much more is this the case for us who have an eternal prize of infinite worth in Jesus Christ as 19th century British pastor Charles Spurgeon once said if he Jesus gave his all to me which was much should I not give my little all to him before Jesus a Gentile had to become a Jew in order to be saved be circumcised keep all the laws of Moses that marked out the Jews as God's chosen people not only could they not eat strangled animals and blood they also couldn't eat pigs horses camels hares lobsters clams catfish squids oysters shrimp mussels crabs snakes worms eagles vultures hawks ostriches cormorants owls storks herons flies cockroaches rats mice lizards and so on

I know you've had some of those the biblical dietary laws forbade the eating of animals that deviated from certain creation categories for example land animals that part the hoof and have cloven feet but do not chew the cud you're not supposed to eat them or sea creatures that don't have scales and fins you're not supposed to eat them or winged insects that also walk on four of their legs you're not supposed to eat them by distinguishing clean and unclean animals in this way and committing the Jews as a holy people to be set apart for God and eat only the clean animals God taught his people to distinguish between what is holy and what is common to remember that

their identity is as God's special chosen people but through Jesus' death and resurrection the dividing line between Jews and Gentiles has been erased it's been toppled and by commanding Peter to eat the unclean foods in the vision in Acts chapter 10 God taught Peter and all of us not to call Gentiles whom God has called clean unclean there is now no more distinction between Jews and Gentiles there is now therefore no need to make distinction between clean and unclean food and now we may eat all of those previously forbidden foods though I don't want to eat some of those we can't eat them it's like victory foods as we eat them we give we testify to the fact that Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled before Jesus God's people had to make perpetual sacrifices for sin their sacrifices and offerings for sin were never fully adequate because they were mere shadow of the reality that Jesus would be Jesus the sacrificial lamb who takes away our sins so every year they had to make sacrifices on the day of atonement as I mentioned last week but this annual ritual only served to heighten their awareness of their sinfulness and their state of separation from [52 : 12] God there was a veil covering that separated them from God a reminder that their sin still separates them from him even after they make atonement even after they make their sacrifice but now Jesus has offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice so we have full forgiveness for our sins and when Jesus died the curtain of the temple was torn in two so now when we sin we don't need to find ourselves a priest to make sacrifices for us we don't need to supply the animals for sacrifice because our great high priest Jesus has already made the once and for all sacrifice we simply return to the cross confess our sins to God who forgives us on the basis of what Jesus has accomplished in shedding his blood for us now all those who turn from their sins and trust in Jesus regardless of their background may be saved will be saved what freedom what light burden because Jesus has carried the heavy burden we now carry only a light one because Jesus has worn the hard yoke we now bear an easy yoke and this is why in verse 31 the Gentile Christians rejoice because of the encouragement the apostles and the elders decided not to burden the Gentile believers with the yoke that they themselves have never been able to carry what about you are you still bearing the heavy burden of needing to save yourself needing to be righteous enough to get to heaven the only way we can be saved is not our own blood sweat and tears it's the blood of Jesus let me close by reading the hymn that we sang earlier second verse or third verse nothing nothing can for sin atone nothing but the blood of Jesus not of good that I have done nothing but the blood of Jesus oh precious is the flow that makes me white as snow no other fount I know nothing but the blood of Jesus Lord God help us to renounce all other source of assurance help us to cling only to the blood of Jesus to the cross of Jesus to the life death and resurrection of Jesus oh Lord Jesus our King you are our only hope you are our only savior we look to you and it's in your name we pray amen